Mad in America
SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Remembering Bhargavi Davar: A Global Leader in the Struggle for Human Rights

By **Robert Whitaker** - May 24, 2024

The struggle for human rights, in global communities and for all, is, I think, at the center of human progress, and those who are leaders in this struggle deserve their place in an international pantheon of heroes. In the United States, we think of the long struggle for Civil Rights for African Americans, and the list of leaders in this struggle is a lengthy and familiar one, starting, of course, with Martin Luther King, Jr.

And such is how I think of Bhargavi Davar, who passed away from lung cancer on May 22, at age 61. She is survived by her daughter, Netra Prabha Davar.

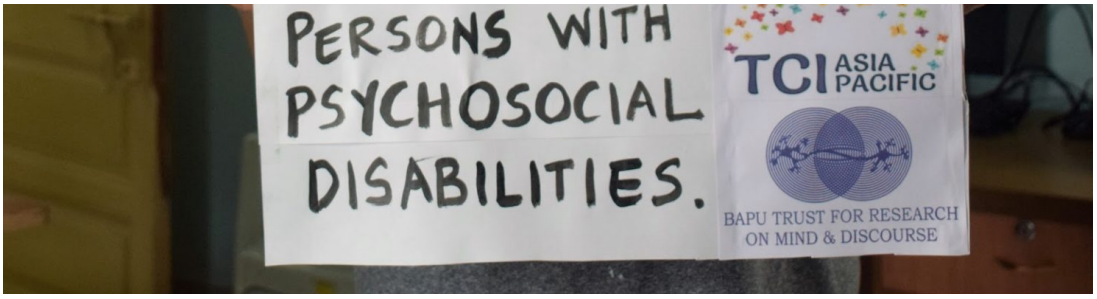
Bhargavi Davar

I first met Bhargavi in the summer of 2015, when she was a speaker at the World Hearing Voices Conference in Spain. At first, in my own my myopic way, I saw her—and admired her—through the lens of psychiatric survivor activist. She identified as a childhood survivor of psychiatric institutions in India, and in 1999 founded the Bapu Trust for Research on Mind and Discourse in Pune, India. She named the trust after her mother Bapu, who had experienced the horrors—and violence—of psychiatric institutionalization as a person with psychosocial disabilities.

She was a vocal critic of the "medical model" and described the system of care that ensued as "violent," and spoke about how this western model was a type of colonization that had supplanted traditional healing practices in India and the Global South. The Bapu Trust sought to promote user/survivor mental health advocacy, rights-based services, and peer-support within the community, while also studying traditional healing systems in India and the Global South.

While personal experience may have been the driver of this work, she brought scholarship and great skill as a writer to her work. She trained as a philosopher and social science researcher at the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay, and published and co-edited several books, including *Psychoanalysis as a Human Science* (1994), *Mental Health of Indian Women* (1999), *Mental Health from a Gender Perspective* (edited, 2001), and *Gendering Mental Health* (co-edited, 2015.) She also published collections of poems and short stories, and papers in research journals.

In 2004, she became a board member of the World Network of Users and Psychiatric Survivors, which established a task force that helped prompt the 2008 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This groundbreaking document declared that people with disabilities should enjoy the same rights and fundamental freedoms as everyone else, and, in essence, declared that forced treatment and forced hospitalization should end.



Bhargavi Davar

Bhargavi then became one of the first CRPD trainers in India and soon throughout Asia, as she travelled to the Philippines, Nepal, Hong Kong, Fiji, Kingdom of Tonga, South Korea, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and China. The Indian government invited her to participate in the drafting of a CRPD compliant disability law, with the Bapu Trust putting CRPD compliance at the top of its agenda. The Trust, under her leadership, conducted CRPD trainings for legal professionals, social workers, and other professional groups—as well as for disability organizations—throughout Asia and the Pacific.

In 2014, the Bapu Trust created Transforming Communities for Inclusion, Asia Pacific (now TCI Global) to further this work to "ensure the full inclusion of persons with psychosocial disabilities," as set forth in the CRPD.

In short, Bhargavi saw psychiatric users/survivors as part of a larger group of people with psychosocial disabilities who regularly suffered a loss of human rights and fundamental freedoms, with the CRPD a mandate from the UN for countries to protect those rights.

In 2016, the Bapu Trust hosted a meeting of the International Network Towards Alternatives and Rights-Based Supports (INTAR), and as Bhargavi wrote in 2017, in a post on the meeting for Mad in America, it did so in the spirit of "inclusion."

> "It was largely the Asian movement of persons with psychosocial disabilities, going by the name TCI-Asia, that saw INTAR India 2016 as an event on 'inclusion.' It was not only about 'alternatives' for supporting people in 'extreme states or in crisis,' though there was that, too. The global south is much more centrally engaged and embedded within the cross-disability movement than the global north, and within the milieu of transformations inspired by the CRPD. Countries have not only ratified the CRPD, but cross disability movements have mobilized us into their movement to understand us better and to include us in their political and advocacy actions. For us, the object of the conference was to lean 'how to practice inclusion,' which is a question about life, and not just to learn non-medical alternatives, which is still about treatment."

It was at that meeting that I came to see—and admire—Bhargavi and her work through the broader lens of a global leader for human rights, with her work as a psychiatric survivor activist simply one aspect of that work. I also believe that INTAR India in 2016 has had the most profound impact of any conference that I know of on the global mental health discourse. There were representatives from the World Health Organization and the UN at the meeting (including members of the UN's CRPD committee), and in the wake of that meeting, both the World Health Organization, under the leadership of Michelle Funk, and the UN Special Rapporteur for Health, Dainius Pūras, issued calls for radical

change in psychiatric care, with a de-emphasis on drugs and the biological model, and a focus instead on the social determinants of health, and the provision of services grounded in a human rights approach.

For Mad in America, the INTAR conference led to the creation in 2018 of Mad in Asia, which was founded with support by TCI Asia and the International Disability Alliance. Bhargavi, in concert with the founding editors Jayasree Kalathil and Jhilmil Breckenridge, envisioned this MIA affiliate as an e-zine, with the stated goal of setting forth a narrative that focuses on the "human rights and community inclusion of persons with psychosocial disabilities." Mad in Asia, under their leadership, remained an active webzine for four years. (Jhilmil and Bhargavi spoke about their views on a MIA podcast in 2018.)

Here are remembrances of Bhargavi Davar from those who had the good fortune, in one arena or another, to engage with her in this effort for radical change, both within the world of psychiatry and beyond.

Jayasree Kalathil

Remembering is honouring.

I remember. The first time we met in 1996 at Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies in Hyderabad. Your big, beautiful eyes that held an ocean of sorrow, and also the passion and confidence that foretold the force of nature you would become in the world where we fought, together with many others from around the globe, for self-determination as psychiatric survivors and persons with psychosocial disabilities.

I remember. All that I learned from you. The political conviction that you nurtured that led me away from a life in literature and into mad activism and research for over two decades. The clarity you brought, over the years, to my fledgling thoughts about madness in a mad-making world. The many discussions about women's rage and how it could be channelled, without having to let go of it, into something useful to connect with others. The inspiration you gave to advocate, to organize, to write about the non-consensus realities some of us live in.

I remember. Your home that became my refuge through the turbulent years of my life even as you were yourself riding rough waves. Our shared love of nature, and of growing things which you took to a whole other level through AhamSetu Sustainable Lives in Cities. The way you were a compassionate, liberating mother to your daughter.

I remember. Moving to Pune to work with you, my first 'proper' job, at Bapu Trust for Research on Mind and Discourse, the organization you set up in memory of your mother to fight against the violence and discrimination ingrained into the institutions that were supposed to care for those with psychosocial disabilities. The days in the office in Fathima Nagar and nights on the small balcony of my one-room home, listening to you as you analyzed patriarchy and the collusion of psychiatry in disempowering women who deviated from the roles expected of us by diagnosing us with mental illness. Learning from you about the continued harm caused by the colonial notion of 'unsoundness of mind' that still exists in our legal frameworks and our institutions of care. Watching you lay the foundations for all that

you would accomplish in your life.

I remember. Watching, now from the periphery of your life, as you went on to spread your passion and your light, through your work on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), collaborating with global disability organisations in training disability rights advocates and their groups to strengthen their advocacy for inclusion and rights; through campaigns to end coercion in all its forms, especially in the form of the Mental Health Act; through Transforming Communities for Inclusion (TCI Asia Pacific and TCI Global); through your writing; through Seher Urban Community Mental Health and Inclusion programme; through your work in arts-based therapy.

I remember. Our first collaboration creating a mental health advocacy platform in the form of the print newsletter, aaina, and our last, this time online, the platform Mad in Asia Pacific.

I remember. The differences of opinions, and oh, the irritations and arguments stemming from our stubbornness that was well-matched in intensity. The long, sullen silences that ended with even longer chats and emails, the catchups in London, in Pune, in Leicester, in Galway, in Paris.

Most of all, I remember your unwavering belief in the idea of interconnectedness which was rooted in your deep faith in Buddhist principles. And how you went about pouring everything you were, everything you had, into making the world a kinder, more compassionate place. A whole lifetime of work dedicated to decolonising the mind.

Rest now, my friend, my love, as we, all of us who were fortunate to have known you, continue to remember.

Ayurdhi Dhar

I first read Bhargavi's work as a young doctoral student. Over years I have gone back to her writings which have become even more pertinent with time. They taught me to not accept partial solutions and to bluntly call out falsehoods when I see it. She fought against the witch hunt of indigenous healing systems and wrote about the social nature of human emotionality. Her unwavering rights-based approach and her unrelenting criticism for Psychiatry's many abuses are well-known, but her academic contributions are just as important as we try to decolonize Psychology in South Asia. Her voice fighting for service-user rights will be missed.

Kimberly Lacroix

One of the foremost voices representing and amplifying the experiences of persons with psychosocial disabilities from Asia has left us just a day before Buddha Poornima. The significance of this is left open to interpretation to each of us who have known her in the varied roles she held in our lives. A fierce advocate of the rights of persons with psychosocial disabilities and alternative healing traditions, she did not just challenge the mental health discourse but turned it in a way that allowed us, those of us within the closed confines of the mental health framework, to see experiences of persons across disabilities.

Today as she passes on, we carry with us the flame she ignited in us and hope we can carry her conviction and dedication through our work.

Prateeksha Sharma

Life is not fair to many, but we have a choice how to respond. Bhargavi's choices at every stage, her progressive unfoldment, which I witnessed for a short time merit a bigger canvas. It is my hope many children whose mothers suffer thus will tune into Bhargavi's story and see what someone can make of their life. Our choices are our destiny, after all.

If someone's life could have been decimated by the toll schizophrenia can take it could have been Bhargavi's. Yet, if there was someone who did exemplary work in mental health in India it was her. No doubt her work does not evoke the kind of recognition in the average person mind a celebrity would, but in the minds of hundreds of people all around the world who have a connection with the field of disability, health and mental health, in particular she will continue to inspire a fondness, appreciation and thankfulness. To overcome the damage done from early age to oneself, creating a vast ecosystem to support others and healing herself from the injustice(s) life has meted out to her, this woman stood as an exemplar of the truly heroic. When I saw it last her WhatsApp status showed a desire to be nondescript: *leave no footprints*. At least Bhargavi can rest in peace knowing her footsteps will remain indelible on the sands of time.

Kaaren Mathias

Bhargavi's generosity to me was hugely instructive as we formed Burans, our mental health initiative in Uttarakhand in 2014. On several visits to Bapu Trust in Pune Bhargavi shared her ideas and wisdom with me. One key learning was the value of 'corner conversations' and dialogue to build knowledge and skills for mental health in communities (vs the one-way monologues that too often are used for 'health education'.) Another approach that we find so helpful is psychosocial support groups modelled from Bapu Trust. On a personal front, Bhargavi and I loved sharing ideas about sourdough bread and the relative merits of Bajra vs Madua vs Ragi flours for a great loaf. Bhargavi's roof garden was an oasis and definitely her happy place. Much respect and much sadness with Bhargavi's passing from me and the Burans team.

Liam MacGabhann

When the predominantly male white privileged radicals of the north western hemisphere liked to talk about our alternatives in mental health; Bhargavi reminded us where we got the alternatives, who was colonised in the gathering and who is now suffering because we can afford to export psychiatry—'the Global South'. A beacon of light who showed women, the classless and the dispossessed that inclusion can become a reality in solidarity. World changer, I will miss you.

Justin Karter

Bhargavi Davar's life and work stand as a testament to the transformative power of activism in the realm of mental health and psychosocial disability. As a survivor of psychiatric institutions in India, Bhargavi's personal experiences fueled her critical stance against the medical model of mental health, which she deemed violent and dehumanizing. Bhargavi dedicated over 30 years to rejecting this model, publishing books and papers that exposed its failures. In 1999, she founded the Bapu Trust, India's first national organization challenging the mental health system's values and practices. Her work extended to creating the largest peer support program for low-income communities in the Global South, emphasizing zero coercion and community-based support. Bhargavi's impact was global–Through her

work with TCI (Transforming Communities for Inclusion), she advocated for the rights of people with psychosocial disabilities across Asia and the Pacific. Bhargavi was committed to legal reform and action-oriented research, striving to replace the dominant psychiatric paradigms with rights-based, community-driven alternatives. On a personal note, Bhargavi was a guiding light for my own research, offering critical feedback that enriched my understanding of psychosocial disability advocacy in the Global South. Her legacy is one of dedication to transforming mental health care, advocating for inclusive policies, and fostering communities where rights and humanity are respected.

Will Hall

Bhargavi was vitally important in shaping me as a community development worker: she taught me about the connections between colonialism, spirituality, patriarchy and human rights in psychiatry. I remember visiting Bhargavi and colleagues years ago at the Bapu Trust in Pune, where we met with local members for a support group. The scene was dreamlike: we climbed up rickety ladders to gather in a circle under the hot sun on the rooftop of a half-constructed residential building, making do with the scarce resources available but abundant with motivation and inspiration. Our conversation weaved through people's daily lives, far outside the frame of "mental health" and instead centered on family and survival, poverty and friendship, suffering and hope. The group's collective sensibility struck a deep chord in me of true social solidarity, a feeling I've experienced often when I've been fortunate enough to travel in the global south but which seems more rare in the fear-stricken individualism of the hyper-capitalist north. Bhargavi was weaving a fabric that is torn and all but forgotten in the so-called "rich" countries: we can honor her memory by re-learning what community truly is, recognizing it when we see it, and doing our best to help it grow. You can listen to a wonderful interview I did with Bhargavi on Madness Radio.

Peter Lehmann

What a great loss of an energetic, gifted, supportive and warm-hearted woman. My condolences go especially to her daughter. I was happy to met Bhargavi twice, the first time at the 5th Congress of the European Network of (ex-)Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (A joined congress of ENUSP and the Users and Survivors of Psychiatry) "Networking for our Human Rights and Dignity" (July 17 – 21, 2004 in Vejle, Denmark).

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Editor's note: Anyone wishing to add a remembrance to this post can send it to rwhitaker@madinamerica.com.

Robert Whitaker

Robert Whitaker is a journalist and author of two books about the history of psychiatry, *Mad in America* and *Anatomy of an Epidemic*, and the co-author, with Lisa Cosgrove, of *Psychiatry Under the Influence*. He is the founder of madinamerica.com.